

The 1926 general strike in Hackney



Barry Burke's account of the UK general strike of 1926 in the East London borough of Hackney.

When the strike was declared in May 1926, the Hackney Council of Action took over a local boxing hall, the Manor Hall in Kenmore Road [I think at number 16], as the headquarters and ran the strike from there. Throughout the duration of the strike the Council of Action was in continuous session organising the strike locally. Reports were arriving all the time from various parts of the borough and the place took on the character of a nerve centre.

Not everyone was called out on strike at once and there were others such as local tradesmen who were exempted by the TUC. These tradesmen had to present themselves to the Council of Action, give their reasons for wanting to carry on their business, and if the Council were satisfied they were given a permit and a sticker to be put on their vans. It stated "BY PERMISSION OF THE TUC" and the strikers had great satisfaction sticking these on.

Public meetings were held all over the borough, particularly around the Mare Street area and Kingsland Road, the two main thoroughfares that cut through the borough and in Victoria Park.

Police intimidation was always a problem for the strikers and it was in Kingsland Road that this manifested itself in an untypical but frightening confrontation on Wednesday 5th May. One eye-witness recalls:

"The whole area was a seething mass of frightened but nevertheless belligerent people. The roads and pavement were jammed, horse vans, lorries and 'black' transport were being manhandled; police were there in force and I suppose that for a time things could have been described as desperate.

The crucial point came when a fresh force of police arrived on the outskirts and I heard an officer call out: 'Charge the bastards. Use everything you've got'. And they did. I saw men, women and even youngsters knocked over and out like ninepins. Shades of Peterloo. If they



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had been armed, apart from their truncheons and boots, Kingsland Road would have gone down in history as an even greater massacre.”

The police carried out baton charges in other parts of Hackney on the same day and the St John’s Ambulance men set up a casualty station in Kingsland Road a day or so afterwards.

Mare Street Tram Depot, now Clapton Bus Garage [and *now* presumably the Bus Garage at the bottom of the Narrow Way?] was to be the scene of further incident on that same Wednesday. The men had all joined the strike on the first day along with the other transport workers and the depot was empty. Even the canteen staff had gone home and all that was left was the picket line outside. Suddenly, under military escort, along came a crowd of ‘patriotic volunteers’ to start up a tram service.

The picket line was not big enough to stop them entering the depot but by the time this was done, word had reached Harry Lee and his Council of Action round the corner in Kenmure Road. Within minutes the area outside was packed with strikers. Their attitude was that the

‘blacklegs’ may have got in but they were not going to let them out!

All day the crowd stayed outside and not a tram moved. As evening approached, the poor unfortunates trapped in the tram depot realised that their stomachs were complaining. None of them had brought food in with them and the canteen staff were not working so they just had to stay hungry.

A few attempts to escape were made but were unsuccessful and about midnight, the Manor Hall received a visit from the local police superintendent. He asked in the most polite way for the Council of Action to assist him. The reply from Harry Lee was less polite.

During the early hours of Thursday morning, a few did escape from the depot but were chased all the way down Mare Street, past Well Street to the Triangle where they were finally caught. Unfortunately, at this spot stood a horse trough full of water, so that it was a number of very bedraggled and hungry 'blacklegs' who made their way home that day. No further attempts were made to take any trams out from that particular depot.

Strikebreaking was enthusiastically encouraged by Hackney Borough Council, now no longer in Labour hands. Right from the start they issued a notice calling for volunteers to man essential services. An office was opened in the public library opposite the Town Hall where strikebreakers could sign on and this was kept open from 9am to 8pm. The Council at that time did not have a single Labour member on it and was comprised of 100% Municipal Reformers (Tories and Liberals who stood together on an anti-socialist ticket).

It is interesting to compare Hackney Council's attitude to those of Shoreditch and Bethnal Green, two neighbouring boroughs. In both of these, Labour Borough Councils were in office and the respective strike headquarters there were in the Town Halls themselves!

In Hackney, the Council met on the Thursday and set up a special sub-committee to discharge any emergency functions that were needed. A squad of Special Constables was established for the protection of municipal buildings, one of those was the Mayor's son who was 'just down from Oxford' and was on duty at the Town Hall.

The Hackney Gazette, the local newspaper, did not appear in its usual format as the printers had joined the strike. Instead the editor brought out a single sheet; which makes interesting reading, especially the bulletin brought out on the

second Monday of the strike (10th May).

With the headline **MILITARY ARRIVE AT HACKNEY**, it went on to state that:

“Victoria Park has been closed to the public. In the early hours of Saturday morning, residents in the locality were disturbed by the rumble of heavy motor lorries and afterwards found that military tents had been pitched near the bandstand... We understand that

detachments of the East Lancashire Fusiliers, a Guards Regiment and the Middlesex Regiment have encamped in the park... another body of Regulars is stationed in the vicinity of the Marshes at Hackney Wick.”

Whether this was meant to frighten the strikers or not is not clear but it certainly had no effect on the numbers out on strike in the borough. Despite scares and rumours about people drifting back to work, the number of people on strike in the second week was more than had come out at the beginning on the 3rd of May. All the large factories in the borough had pickets outside them – Bergers Paint Factory in Hackney Wick, Polikoff Ltd., a clothing firm at Well Street and Zinkens Furniture manufacturers in Mare Street were three of the largest.

All public utilities were either closed or being run rather badly by amateurs. The Hackney Gazette once again reported that three boys of the Clove Club (the Hackney Downs School

‘Old Boys’) were driving a train between Liverpool Street and Chingford and that one of the volunteers at the Council’s Dust Destructor was a parson who was busy shovelling refuse into the hoppers. That probably explains why the Council ended their meeting on the Thursday with the Lords Prayer!

The end of the General Strike came suddenly on Wednesday 12th May, with most strikers in a buoyant and confident mood. The TUC leaders, fearing what they had unleashed, went cap in hand and unconditionally surrendered to Baldwin at 10 Downing Street.

When the news came through to the Strike HQ at Kenmure Road, the first reaction was one of disbelief. Notice were put up advising strikers not to pay attention to what they called

‘BBC Bluff’, but when the official notice of a return to work was given to them

during the afternoon, their first reaction was that the strike must have been successful. The Hackney Gazette reported that

“it was publicly alleged that the miners were going back to work without any reduction of wages. There were shouts of ‘We’ve won!’ and cheers, while a section of the crowd began to sing The Red Flag”.

However, as soon as the truth filtered through to them the reaction according to one participant was “bloody murder”. Julius Jacobs who was active in Hackney during the General Strike remembers that ‘The Bastards’ was the most favourable epithet applied to the General Council of the TUC:

“Everybody’s face dropped a mile because they had all been so enthusiastic. It was really working and victory seemed to be absolutely on the plate.”

However, the strikers were still in a militant mood unlike their leaders. That evening, a huge march took place. Several thousands of strikers took part in a march from the Manor Hall in Kenmure Road down Mare Street and Well Street to Hackney Wick and Homerton ending up in a mass meeting outside the Hackney Electricity Works at the end of Millfields Road. A drum and fife band accompanied the marchers and it was led by two men with a large banner.

Before the arrival of the marchers, police were rushed up to the Works in a lorry which was driven at great speed through the crowd by one of the Special Constables and as the gates were opened for it, a number of soldiers in field uniform and wearing steel helmets were seen inside. The march was so long that after having a mass meeting by the head of the marchers, the speakers had to go to the back of the march which stretched for about a third of a mile and hold another one.

The return to work was orderly and in most cases without incident. A certain amount of victimisation of militants took place but no more than anywhere else.

This text was originally from *Rebels With A Cause: The History of Hackney Trades Council 1900-1975* by Barry Burke (Hackney Trades Council and the Hackney Workers’ Educational Association, 1975). Taken from <http://hackneyhistory.wordpress.com/2013/01/03/not-athing-was-moving-hackney-and-the-1926-general-strike/>